



“MASCULINITY IN THE AGE OF TECHNOLOGY AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT”

Sumit Roy

ABSTRACT

This paper studies the present patterns of 'masculinity' in the context of global capitalist economy that maneuvers technological 'progress' giving rise to women's 'empowerment'. The paper seeks to examine how the modern technological construction 'power', 'empowerment' and 'disempowerment' is reshaping the contemporary ideas of masculinity and gender issues, and thereby helps to sustain the heteronormative power relations.

KEYWORDS: 'Masculinities', 'Globality', 'Empowerment', 'Technological Construction of Power'

Masculinity is inherently related to power – the power to historically dominate women not only sexually and physically, but also in social, cultural, economic and political way. In all cultures masculinity has taken different forms and shapes at different times to hold its power to dominate women. Thus, masculinity sometimes assumed to be just physical power as it is expressed in different games like wrestling, boxing etc and in many heroic and epical poetry. It sometimes meant the power of protecting women and one's country as expressed in medieval romances. Masculinity also sometimes appeared to be intellectual knowledge as advocated in renaissance literature. Besides, more importantly, masculinity has always been associated with sexual power or the power to sexually possess and dominate women as expressed in different cultural practices and myths.

In modern times, however, the idea of masculinity has become much complex and conflicting. This has resulted from a more liberal approach to sexual relationship, that is, the social acceptance of living together before marriage, homosexuality and lesbian relationship; the rise of women power; the development of feministic study. Consequently, a relevant question has crept up – “Is masculinity in a state of crisis in today's world?”

It is being argued by many that masculinity is becoming increasingly challenged, especially in the last century, with the emergence of Women's rights and the development of the role of women in society. For instance, Australian archeologist Peter McAllister[1] stated, “I have a strong feeling that masculinity is in crisis. Men are really searching for a role in modern society; the things we used to do aren't in much demand anymore”.

The supposed crisis has been frequently attributed to feminism and a resulting questioning both of men's dominance over women and the rights which had been granted to men solely on the basis of their sex. British sociologist John MacInnes[2] argued that “masculinity has always been in one crisis or another” and suggested that the crises arise from the “fundamental incompatibility between the core principle of modernity that all human beings are essentially equal (regardless of their sex) and the core tenet of patriarchy that men are naturally superior to women and thus destined to rule over them.”

Masculinity is in many ways endangered with the advancement of science and technology which have reduced the demand for great physical labour. In the past men were supposed to do hard labour that required great physical strength. This habituation with physical labour gave them enough masculine property; it would lend them muscular features and sexual potency. But with the advancement of scientific technology the demand for physical labour has reduced. In today's world physical labour has turned into 'job'. Most of the men today do their job sitting on chairs throughout the day. This lack of physical labour is now telling upon their physical strength, even sexual potency and muscular features. Thus their masculinity is being endangered not only physically or sexually but also psychologically. The loss of so called masculine features is putting acute psychological pressure on them. They have to keep pace with the social demands on man and the popular media that are endorsing stereotypical manhood.

The reduction of physical strength in work is also making room for women to enter the labor force and thus to encroach upon work fields which were only men's prerogatives. This liberates works from the gender bias. Women are participating in every field of works. Even in today's warfare you don't need to thrust sword with great muscular strength; what is required is the skill in handling the modern weapons. Recently US Defence has lifted the military's ban on women serving in combat roles. The US President's declaration -- “Valour knows no gender” -- is quite significant in this respect.

The invention of women contraception gives women sexual freedom and man loses his masculine control over female sexuality and thus masculinity gets challenged. The innovation of sanitary napkin gives women the power to overcome her so called 'weakness'. This physiological freedom of women further challenges the masculine pride.

What is more remarkable is that with the rise of women power masculinity is now going through a state of oppression. In media today we see that not only women are being objectified but also men are becoming victims of objectification. Men just like women restrict their food intake in an effort to achieve what they consider an attractively thin body, leading to eating disorders. Thomas Holbrook,[3] a psychiatrist, cites a recent Canadian study indicating as many as one in six of those with eating disorders were men. Younger men who read fitness and fashion magazines are psychologically harmed by the images of perfect male physiques, according to recent research in the United Kingdom. They are being driven into adopting unnatural and rigorous muscle building workout to achieve the desired physical structure, which in extreme cases can lead to body or muscle dysmorphia. In commercials, the ideas of masculinity (especially risk-taking) are presented and encouraged. They appeal to and emphasize the idea that real men overcome danger and enjoy speed (i.e. fast cars/driving fast).

Masculinity means the right to make your claim, the right to demand, the right to have the 'desires' and the right to make those desires fulfilled. But in modern context with the rise of women power women have discovered that they also have some 'desires' which are to be fulfilled. So the table is now turned; the hunter is hunted. Men now have compromised themselves to think that they are also expected to fulfil the desires of women. Today even in the act of lovemaking man has compromised himself to lie back and allowing his partner to come on top. Traditionally men like to keep control during sex; they like to be in charge, to be dominant, to feel that they are leading their partner in the act of lovemaking. In short, it seems to be hard for men to give up control during sex. And that is a real shame, because one of the big problems that stops a couple getting maximum sexual satisfaction is the belief system that says the man has to lead during sex and the woman has to follow. Men generally take the role of the initiator; they talk about “how to make a woman orgasm”, “giving her an orgasm”, and “making her come”, as though somehow female sexuality in general, and the female orgasm in particular, were the property of men. But now men are allowing themselves to be vulnerable in the very act. Reversing the conventional man on top postures is that it gives her the opportunity to experience power and control from a very feminine sexual place. In other words, it gives her the chance to experience the power of her own sexuality – and this can often be a revelation. For one thing, she is not dependent on her man to give her sexual pleasure; instead, she is totally responsible for achieving orgasm herself.

Now the point is if men are directed to satisfying the desires of women can we say that their masculinity will remain inviolate? Masculinity is exerting the power over women. Now if that position becomes staked we can say masculinity is in a state of crisis. Thus, masculinity is getting questioned, challenged and defied at present time.

It could be argued, however, is masculinity in crisis or is it being reframed to suite the present crisis caused by women empowerment? Although the actual stereotypes may have remained relatively constant, the value attached to masculine stereotypes has changed over the past few decades. Thus masculinity takes a new turn in modern context which can be referred to as 'modern masculinity' – the term used by George Lachmann Moose in *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity*[4]. Judith Kegan Gardiner in *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory*[5] discusses how ideas of manhood have been transformed by feminism and how feminism holds the key to the development of

more egalitarian forms of masculinity.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the traditional family structure began to crumble down. During World War II, women entered the workforce to replace the men sent overseas as soldiers. Women becoming the primary income-earners gradually resulted in men the primary care-givers. As of 2007, 159,000 dads were primary care-givers in the U.S. and this number is increasing. Dubbed “stay-at-home dads”, these men are performing duties in the home previously undertaken by women.

Other examples of modern masculinity include the willingness of men to defy stereotypes. For example, regardless of age or nationality, men more frequently rank good health, harmonious family life and good relationships with their spouse or partner as important to their quality of life. Today a truly masculine husband is one who spends ‘quality time’ with his wife and gives her space, who can show respect and take much care of the children, and who knows how to compromise. He also has to be sharp, intelligent with a good sense of humour. He is expected to have integrity and values rather than prancing around like a hyper-masculine idiot. Radhika Chopra’s *Reframing Masculinities: Narrating the Supportive Practices of Men*[6] studies men across India who work towards achieving a more gender-equal society.

However, masculinity crisis is not a recent phenomenon and there are several periods of masculine crisis throughout history, many of which predate the women’s movement and post-industrial societies.

Ancient literature always associates masculinity with strength and courage. Cicero states: “a man’s chief quality is courage.”[7] The Hebrew Bible (1000 BCE) King David of Israel told his son “Be strong, and be a man”. Legends of ancient heroes – The Epic of Gilgamesh, the Iliad and the Odyssey – reveal qualities in the hero that inspired respect, like wisdom or courage, the knowing of things that other men do not know and the taking of risks that other men would not dare. Medieval masculinity was essentially Christian and chivalric. Again ethics, courage and generosity are seen as characteristic of the portrayal of men. Beowulf and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight are famous examples of medieval ideals of masculinity. In the Victorian era of Great Britain, masculinities were undergoing a transformation from their traditional ‘heroic’ scripts. As the Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle wrote in 1831:

The old ideal of Manhood has grown obsolete, and the new is still invisible to us, and we grope after it in darkness...

Christianity contributed much to the Victorian concept of masculinity. The real Victorian man was to be spiritual and a faithful believer. Hence, the husband and father were considered to be the pater familias with extensive power. He was the head of the household, but his duty was not only to rule, but also to protect those whom he viewed as weak—his wife and their children. With the beginning of the second half of the 19th century the picture of the ideal of manliness started to shift. Due to publications such as Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* (1859) and Friedrich Nietzsche saying “God is dead!” (1882) the main focus in the concept of masculinity shifted from a spiritual focus on religion towards a commitment to muscle: ‘muscular Christianity’ was created. The development towards a focus on muscle manifested itself in the belief that in order to educate one’s mind one had to educate one’s body. This assumption has its roots in the rise of natural science and especially biology. Thus, a fascination with health led to a sports and game playing mania. The athlete was the new hero of society.

Concepts of masculinity, thus, have varied according to time and place and are constantly subject to change and thus, argues R W Connell[8], it is more appropriate to talk of ‘masculinities’ than of a single masculinity. It has also been argued that masculinity is always an unstable phenomenon and never ultimately achieved.

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